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## A TALK ABOUT PORTRAITURE.

WILLIAM HAZLITT, the best of all the English writers on art, it was, who said that the greatest works of the greatest masters are their portraits, and Ruskin concurring in this opinion very justly adds, that no greater thing than a noble portrait of a noble man can be reached by art. This is, however, by no means a current or popular belief, either with laymen or artists. Indeed, Sir Joshua Reynolds, who is to be held responsible for very many of the art heresies still abroad—who, while making a trade of portraiture, still delighted to pay homage to the *grand style*, as exemplified by Michael Angelo—and was at much pains to belittle that department of art through which whatever lasting reputation he was to have, was made.

Later on, Inman, who did some portraits that not many of the strongest men of our time would have any just cause to be ashamed of, seemed to have looked upon his avocation as a sort of pot-boiling arrangement—a means of raising the wind, and in some biography I remember reading, he is made to complain bitterly of the lack of appreciation of *high art*. He had a harmless little bit of inanity called "Mumble-the-Peg," being a landscape with figures—much landscape and a small proportion of figures, which to him stood for high art, and it would seem he had pleasure in pointing to it with bitterness, as an illustration of the vanity and ignorance of his countrymen. "They will have me paint their phizs," he is made to say, "through vanity; but as to high art, they have allowed my Mumble-the-Peg to hang upon the walls of my studio for years." I suppose this excellent painter would, if he had had any choice in the matter at all, have been quite willing to have his chances of posthumous fame rest upon his most wonderful effort, "Mumble-the-Peg." Fortunately, though, for the "whole" of the people, the "remnant" who are blessed, or afflicted, as you will, with the creative faculty, may not dictate to posterity as to which of their works may be most worthily be let to live: for the simple reason that the "whole" have had little cause for belief in the infallible quality of the "remnants" judgment in this respect. It does not, as a rule, take many generations to pretty thoroughly sift and adopt the works of a man, or else pass them altogether as the things of a day that have done their work for good or for bad; and this process is not guided at all by the directions or opinions of the men whose works are undergoing the process, fortunately, or the result would be different and scarcely so satisfactory.

Time, indeed, in its nice adjustment of values, has made it evident enough to us that Sir Joshua was essentially a portrait painter; that our own Inman's "Mumble-the-Peg" was not nearly so high an object of art as he fondly imagined it; and that the works of the older and greater masters, most complete and satisfactory in every sense, are their portraits.

It must be borne in mind, however, that there is a vast difference between portraiture and likeness making, and one would naturally suppose that intelligent people generally are quite well aware of the distinction; but such, indeed, is not the case, and I am very much afraid that

people who frequent exhibitions and collect pictures, have a strong inclination, as a rule, to admire the striking likeness rather than the profound portrait, for the simple reason that it is striking. We are apt to like what we can readily apprehend and grasp, because it is an invidious sort of flattery—to be let seen at once just what an artist or a poet meant by it, you know. The sentiment in Mr. Longfellow borrowed, and in the process of embalming, in his "Psalm of Life," added thereto and improved: "Life is long and art is fleeting, and its goal is not the grave," is an immensely popular sentiment which not many of its readers stop to think, that as the Christian would see the matter, is the baldest kind of platitude; but coming oracularly from so popular a poet, this truism is vastly pleasing to many an honest man who has thought of the same thing in the same way himself—"ha-ha!"

To one somewhat trained in the matter of looking after the truth, rather than for confirmation of his own views, and the flattery to be got out of finding that some painter has painted a thing just as he has seen it, platitudes are invidiously obvious, and a painter who can teach him to see no more, or other than he has learned to see directly in nature, has nothing for him. So he must go to some painter or poet who has got beyond the outlying facts of nature, into her profounder depths of truth—to works that have neither the soothing quality of current commonplace, the glare of a torch-light procession, or the blare of a brass band.

The strong tendency that not a few cultivated and most amiable people have to get very angry when they see a work of art they can't understand is quite amazing, and would be amusing if the direct results of it were not so bad for good artists and good art. They will insist upon having an artist see things exactly as they do; "For, have I not eyes—hang it!—and can't I see for myself?" is an expression common enough—too common, in fact. People pretty generally think, I am convinced, that what they see with their eyes is all that is to be seen, and from the fact, no doubt, that the sense of sight, of all the senses, is the one that gets next to no education, outside art schools. We are taught in the ordinary school of the youth that there are a multiplicity of ways of seeing a thing mentally—points of view that shift with the added and various experiences of each day of our lives—that throw over the same thing another color, and bring to the surface new meanings. All readers of poetry who have ever read a sonnet of Shakespeare, and read it again and again, find always with their widening vision the master's work touches somewhere the new experience, and throws a light ahead. It will rather startle this same appreciative and apprehensive man of mental training, if you tell him that a great portrait will make him see the wife of his bosom in a truer light and more deeply than ever before, for even a most commonplace personality carries a more multiple subtlety than the farthest reaching poet's verse.

I read somewhere only a day or so ago, an article copied from that accomplished writer's newspaper, and attributed to Mr. Chas. Dudley Warner, about a bust that some young man has recently made of Mark Twain. Mr. Warner says,

as nearly as I can remember, that the likeness is the first thing to be considered in a performance of the kind, and that it may afterwards be looked at as a work of art. And this is the view that almost any one without special training, would take of the matter, and I was going to say, in consequence, a superficial view, but that might be not a just thing to say. At any rate it is superficial, and a confused way of looking at the matter if we are to make the distinction between a portrait and a likeness. If the bust is no more than a likeness I don't know that it needs to be considered at all, and if it is in any sense a portrait it should be considered as that, and in no other way, for the aim of the artist having been to make an interpretation of character, inasmuch as his art is good or bad, so in like measure it follows, of course, is the portrait adequate or inadequate.

A clever journalist said to me once, as we were passing a bust of a well-known actor: "It is a striking portrait of him."

"A striking likeness, if you please, but not a portrait," I replied, somewhat to the astonishment of my friend. He did not apply to this particular form of art the same general principle by which he would have measured the excellence of a sonnet or a sonata. In either poetry or music, he would have known at once that startling and superficial are synonymous. Now, the young sculptor's bust of Mark Twain may not be to any looker-on a likeness at all; but still, for all that, and possibly because of that, it may be a most profound portrait. Remembering that never were two human beings in the world who could see any object in exactly the same way, and that to be a great portraitist—if I may use the term, implies a natural aptitude, trained through much disciplined use to see deeply into the very springs of character. We would not be astonished to find a portrait by such an artist so far from a likeness that we may not at first sight be able to recognize it. But accustomed ourselves to the point of view which may be far enough away from our own, we will then, entering into the artist's sphere, see the character in another light, and in some way more comprehensively than ever before. All artists who have had much right success in portraiture know perfectly well how almost impossible it is to get positive hold of any thing like a fixed fact. Indeed in the human face there is no such thing as a fixed fact, they are all moveable ones, and facts that in themselves to a very great extent change from day to day. In one case I remember of a poet of whom I made a bust, the forms of the face changed so that it would have been noticeable to the untrained eye. In cases of this kind, or in any case for the matter of that, the artist must positively establish his conception of the character, and then use his subject as a model in a merely suggestive way, that is to say, in order to have your work thoroughly in keeping, and in that kind of keeping that will fix your conception. You may choose an expression that possibly never was put in that way upon the face of your subject, and fix all those ever-changing facts of form for the sake of arriving at the interior truth in a way in which you never saw them, using them in fact merely as

symbols, making of them, as they are indeed, the outward expressions of an interior truth you see and hold until it is realized. These are some of the elemental principles that enter into portraiture.

If the reader has ever seen a number of artists make studies of the same place or of the same thing, he will have seen how differently they have felt—or seen what they have been sketching, and the sketches differ most, one from the other in the degree that the artists are men of originality or who look at nature through their own and not the spectacles of another man—or of a school. A number of pupils from a school or studio would see the same thing, not so differently as the older artists who had got into seeing their own way, but after the manner of the masters of their school. Now the likeness maker is either a crude, untrained person who has not learned to see more than the obvious outlying facts, or one who has been trained to see them and insist upon them in a conventional way, and to do every thing with the terrible certainty of one trained into inflexible narrowness. He works from the outside, while the true artist works as I have said from an interior conception, and his work is consequently really a portrayal—a revelation.

Do not infer that I would have an artist neglect or slur over facts of form or detail, or to twist them into any unwarrantable shape for the sake of bringing forth a truth of personality, for the simple reason that a conception dragged into life through such violence is apt to be a strained and contorted one. There is no doubt that often the very spirit of a personality is quite strongly conveyed through a violation of facts of form and of their proper order, and when it is done, the accomplishment excuses the means. Every man of genius is in fact, as has been often enough said, a law unto himself, and people are not as a rule inclined to quarrel with his methods; but they are upon the other hand pretty certain to become tired enough of the little people who are always ready to make a rush through the master's manner and style, for that royal road, which it seems no end of disastrous experience will teach them, leads nowhere else than to the dogs.

But to invest, combine, and through a composition of many figures and arrangements of light and dark, of color of form and action, to express a story of humanity, a tragedy, a comedy of life; is this not more—said a creative writer to me the other day—is this not more, or a greater thing to do, than the painting of a portrait. It is different of course and brings into play a different set of faculties, but it is not more, nor a greater thing than the painting of a portrait, for to repeat what Mr. Ruskin has said—there can be no greater thing than a noble portrait of a noble man. I certainly cannot conceive of any set of conditions under which it will be possible for an artist to do a higher or a broader work than the painting of a truly noble man or beautiful woman, in whom the loftier and sweeter attributes of humanity have play. To go beyond this would be to pass into the realm of the infinite, which while opening schemes of measureless reach in themselves, will in their treatment always mark in a more or less painful way, the limitations of human power.

W. R. O'DONOVAN.